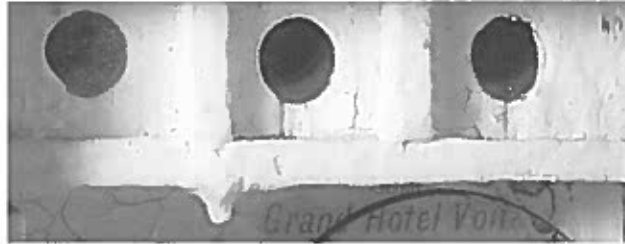


J O S E P H
C O R N E L L
A M e m o i r

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The essence of Joseph Cornell's art is... [his] genius for sensing the connection between seemingly remote ideas, emotions, and objects, and for presenting them in constructions with a subtlety which understands that the more remote, the more incomprehensible they are, the more vital and living they must be to have surmounted the barriers of time and space.¹

Donald Windham



Larry Jordan talks at the edge of his painterly garden in Northern California. Stacks of letters from the celebrated artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) are visible in the exposed, weathered manila envelope on the table. Jordan says that some are addressed to his daughter Lorna. A first offering to the daughter was sent by Cornell when she was two. He had never met her. There is a nostalgic, turn-of-the-century greeting card. And there is a very small box, a gift from Cornell. The purplish-blue color of the box is that of a faded agapanthus or pale sky. Inside there is a cadmium-yellow marble, and a rhinestone flower pin. They are the kind of memorabilia that would enchant a young child in a "five & dime store" during a time seemingly more gentle, the early 1950s. There is another box that fits in Jordan's palm. It is wrapped with an eggshell-colored paper and

tied with a thin, navy string. On one side is an image, possibly reproducing a vintage medical journal illustration with an elegant engraving of an ear. Jordan says he has had this offering from Cornell since 1965. He says he will never open it. What discipline, I say. And marvel at his thirty-three year, self-imposed discipline. When shaken, ever-so lightly, there is a sound, a hollow signal of something more.

Jordan feels that he does not always recognize the unique figure of Cornell in the writings of scholars "who are writing for each other." They misrepresent this man he honors. I think of the word "dissect," or the way innuendo, or exposition of personal experience, can fragment one's perception of the artist's work. To Jordan, there was "magic" in being in Cornell's "studio" in his humble basement. Here he privately witnessed, as Cornell's assistant, the evidence of the artist's incredible creativity, his mind. To Jordan, Cornell's work is "about

the thread of recollection." Cornell's entrancing box sculptures, collages, and films are the same in this regard. Their images act as devices to trigger memories, like the tea-dipped *madeleines* in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

I ask him about the way he "sees" Cornell's films. My question begs Jordan, a noted experimental filmmaker, one who assisted Cornell in "finishing" his films in the mid-60s², and one who shot the only film footage of the artist, to evaluate Cornell's films. But Jordan is one who has a history beyond these simple identifications. I sense that he would brace against such a question. (He has experienced the Fluxus movement and identifies his mentors as the San Francisco Bay Area poet Robert Duncan and artist Jess.) "There are only a finite number of outstanding films in the world," Jordan answers, while holding the box with the eggshell-colored paper.

He begins to talk of silent films, their power, as he slowly fingers the box's navy blue string. He talks of "saving" noted silent films to view later. He lifts the egg-shell paper, caressing the time-ironed creases with infinite care. Sometimes an expectation breathes so strong through the body, as now, it seems to expand time between heartbeats. I know I am looking at the edge of the midnight blue box in the memory, the electric context, of all desirable presents in the past, the aura of Cornell's magical work, the extended literature on Cornell, and the unknown reservoir of Jordan's memory/relationship with Cornell. Jordan says he is purposely "saving" some of the silent films to see in his later days. "There are only a few great films" he says. And unwillingly, like the skin from the body, the paper is gently peeled off the box. I see a Cornell inside—a luminous, spiritual, and delicate, matte-blue relief—the gift. Its purity, its intimacy, its powdery fragility suggest that it has never been exposed to daylight, to the rigors of an everyday reality.

Jordan says, "what we have here is something of a happening."

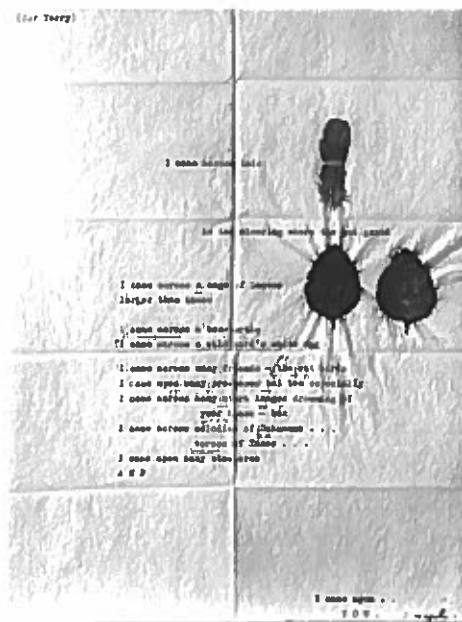
The relief is a grid of squares. In each segment there is a perfectly sculpted, circular indentation. Next, Jordan raises the inside of the box top for a view. Here is an echo—a hazy formation of printed circles. But, it is an impossibility. To have this image printed in time by the azure-blue relief... the circles would need to protrude. The cardboard box is closed. A birth announcement hand-printed in red has been hidden inside on the verso of the eggshell paper. I see the side of the box. And it is no less a mystery now to know this object is comprised of billiard chalk. For true magicians mystify with ordinary, everyday objects.

As Cornell was finishing the little blue box for Lorna Jordan, he was unaware of her father's descent down the staircase. Remembering how Cornell had tied and then kissed the box, Jordan has relayed that "He was aware of that particular magic. He knew it would bring us memories of him." Cornell strived for this same symbolic resonance in his "public" works. As Dickran Tashjian noted in his book, *Gifts of Desire*, Cornell, who was born on Christmas eve, purposely tried to time his exhibitions with the holidays to associate his art with "the gift."

Joseph Cornell was born in 1903 in Nyack, New York. The death of his father, a prosperous textile designer, in 1917 abruptly changed their family life, cultural pursuits, and excursions to Coney Island, the Hippodrome, and vaudeville.³ Cornell's art frequently contains veiled symbols to times before this event. His mother scrimped and worked part time to send him

away to boarding school where he studied science and Romance languages. Cornell's recurrent stomach ailments and nightmares signal his anxiety during this period. On a semester break at home, he awoke panic-stricken with an awareness of the vastness of space learned in Astronomy.⁴ In his art Cornell later mapped out his own controlled universe and imagined histories.

The aniline dyes in Cornell's box-constructions came from his days working at a textile mill in the 1920s. Working in his next job in New York City, as a traveling salesman, he saw influential work by Odilon Redon and other French painters in museums and galleries. He began to forage through second-hand stores, antiquarian book shops, and libraries. The sources he accumulated during the next fifty years in this "voyaging," along with his obsessive note taking,



were catalogued into approximately 165 source material files or *dossiers*.⁵ They provided a secure tether to memory. According to Jordan, a ticket in Cornell's Marcel Duchamp *dossier* could "bring back a conversation with Duchamp. Part of Cornell's filing system was extended to [the preparation of] his boxes and collages. There were at least 200 collages in process, all in brown envelopes, in the dish cabinet." With all things Cornelian, there are greater complexities to his idiosyncratic accumulations, collecting, and cataloguing. In 1946 he exhibited *dossiers* with box-constructions in his *Romantic Museum* at the Hugo Gallery, New York. He thought other artists might find inspiration in these files. The act of archiving—the filing of magazine clippings, photographs, reproductions, found objects, and notes on a litany of sources—is integral to Cornell's formal, creative powers. In a 1959 diary entry, he

wrote, "Prospect of cluttered cellar/ creative filing/creative arranging/as poetics/as technique/as joyous creation." His "ultimate quarry" was the "source of inspiration itself."⁷

After experiencing a healing in 1925, he converted to Christian Science. Its tenets reinforced his mental quests and provided a structure for religious sublimation. Later in his art he converted desire and yearnings to a high spiritual plane.⁸ In 1929 he moved to 3708 Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens, with his beloved brother Robert, who suffered from cerebral palsy, and mother. He remained here until his death. He was not a strict recluse. He lived life in his own terms and allowed visits by many luminaries in the arts.

European Surrealism of the 1930s provided a springboard for Cornell's art. After witnessing New York Gallery owner Julien Levy unpack collages by Max Ernst, Cornell created his first collage/montage. (Cornell exhibited with the Julien Levy gallery until its closure in 1939.) In 1936 he created his first film in collage format. His first box-construction of that year became the crux of an installation piece for the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art. Cornell shared with the Surrealists a love of the nineteenth-century, symbolist aesthetic, as well as the importance of chance connections.⁹ He assimilated other European sources, using art reproductions, and often using the names of French hotels to evoke stars, sky, and navigation in his work.¹⁰ But, American memorabilia, dime-store objects, arcade games, and vaudeville, along with Yankee ingenuity and originality, are hallmarks of Cornell's work. He is by his own admission "an American Constructivist."

Cornell gained prominence in the postwar American art scene and established his workshop at home. During the next two decades, he explored series in thematic sequences, inspired by poets, writers, and artists (Guillaume Apollinaire, Dante's heroine Francesca, Emily Dickinson, Susan Sontag, Juan Gris), ballet and its myths, birds and habitats, hotels, pseudo-science (pharmacies), and childhood pastimes (penny arcades, sand boxes, fountains, and soap bubble sets). His work was prolific, if not ritualistic in its repetition. As Jordan has noted, "he worked fifteen hours a day."

In the 1960s he hired assistants, often through the mediation of a friend. The art critic Dore Ashton recommended a recent graduate from Pratt Institute, painter Terry Schutté.¹¹ Ashton told her, "You will be perfect, you have a good head and are organized. And there is something else—that line from your forehead around your cheekbone. It appears in his favorite women."

Soon after Schutté's interview on January 21, 1964, she received a small, intensely-colored yellow box. Its contents, a sequence of surrealist-like findings, begins with a miniature, wooden game ball, like those in Cornell's *Dovecoat* series of the mid-1950s. This "sphere" is symbolic of the dove, or message-carrier.¹² A page from a vintage *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, relays the enthusiastic sentiment of meeting the ingenue.¹³ A teabag label and pieces of wood connote Schutté's painting easel and the drink she favored in the interview. A circled advertisement for an apartment reads as poetry: blue skies... wind-clouds... moon... sun... space... that's what/you see from the windows of/ [typed in by the artist] Utopia Parkway. A fragment of a woman's profile, forehead to chin, precedes a clipping of a 5-day forecast on the date of their meeting. Its *verso* reads, "active partner wanted."

To Schutté, whose paintings draw from archetypal, pre-verbal sources, Cornell was "a visual poet" who made "magic." His work was "a perfect example of the artist's message finding its language." According to Schutté, "He was six feet tall, skin and bones, with a sallow complexion. He had a peculiar sensibility. He was like a shadow and spoke incredibly cryptically. Working with Cornell was like hanging out with Mallarmé—all that dream—and symbol-talking." Schutté made a practice of removing her watch before working "four hours to infinity in Cornell land." Jordan has said, "Cornell did not sleep. He took naps and when he woke up from dream, he went directly to work. This person did not come out and talk, like you and I. He did not have a whole lot of tolerance for reality or the mundane. He only stayed in that world. You can imagine living in the same house for 24 hours a day... But you sure learned a lot."

Talking about her everyday routine, Schutté related that she was met at the door by Cornell's "imposing" mother. She was "ram-rod straight and would look straight through you." Schutté always made a point of saying hello to Robert. "He was cordial. You never knew his pain [from cerebral palsy.]" In the studio she would shake the game balls in the box-construction from the *Dovecoat* series of the mid-1950s that was later inscribed to her as *Terry's Colombier*. According to Schutté, many of Cornell's pieces were created for such play. Sometimes they had spare parts, like marbles in other colors. (Cornell's idea for his box-constructions may have evolved from Victorian shadow boxes as



Joseph Cornell, *Terry's Colombier*, n.d., mixed media, 8 x 5 1/4 x 2 3/4", Collection of Terry Schutté
Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

entertainment for Robert.) When *Terry's Colombier* is moved, the clock spring vibrates. It is a metaphor for the movement of a bough after the dove has flown away to deliver its message.¹⁴ Remarkably, the beguiling little box-construction, with its spare aesthetic and glowing white paint, seems to evoke absence, as well as a charged moment.

Ostensibly, the role of the assistant was to help with *dossiers* and box-constructions. Cornell wrote Schutté, "actually you played the major role-collation of my file uncovered/some surprises that I/ may put to good use." While Stan Brackage¹⁵ stated that he was only Cornell's "medium" while shooting film for him, Schutté feels her contributions to Cornell's work were

"irrelevant." She was not the instrument to "make the magic happen." Schutté and Jordan learned the vocabulary of Cornell's materials. He layered Le Paige's glue, newsprint, and tempera paint over masonite, and baked it at 350°. He used aniline dyes. His wood boxes were constructed of pine and his images were Photostat reproductions, rarely originals. He was so fearful of losing sources that he frequently purchased more than one copy of a vintage book. Schutté's jobs included procuring *IL Sole Antipasto* can labels for his sun images and taking him out for apple pie, or treks near second-hand stores. Schutté photographed a frail and pensive-looking Cornell framed by stuffed store windows. It is a telling portrait, as the windows resemble those of the French photographer Atget, a major influence for Cornell. Schutté's other photographs lend a live presence to Cornell's studio shelves, Robert's trains, and family photographs. In one portrait, she intuitively "boxed" Cornell's phantom reflection in a window pane. Schutté, a confidante, sound board, or muse, has reflected that, "In Tiepolo's time, the apprentice ground colors and graduated to painting clouds. Working for Cornell was not like painting angels or doing the physical work. It was a discussion that affects a state of mind."

Cornell's letters to Schutté are embellished with findings—Dickran Tashian calls them "tokens"—like a delicate feather, a Piero della Francesca reproduction, or dime-store stickers. Cornell called Schutté a "Tiepolo Woman" and asked, "how does it feel to see yourself across the centuries?" In his letters we see humor, as well, "Are you the door/ in adorable?" His correspondence, however, should not be construed as love letters. They are sentimental evidence of the way the artist re-animated his creative vision through idealized muses or "etherialized beauties,"¹⁶ including Lauren Bacall, Susan Sontag,

Hedy Lamarr, and long list of others. The performance artist Carolee Schneeman wrote that Cornell sustained those friendships with "intangible generative value."¹⁷ According to Jordan, "every box is, in some way, a tribute someone's ability to inspire Joseph... he would attach to some people imaginary essences. Then it became very large, a *Theater of the Mind* as Mary Ann Caws wrote. That gave a basis for getting busy with materials to construct a shrine to that enhanced reminiscence."

The stars of the ballet and movies were frequent muses.

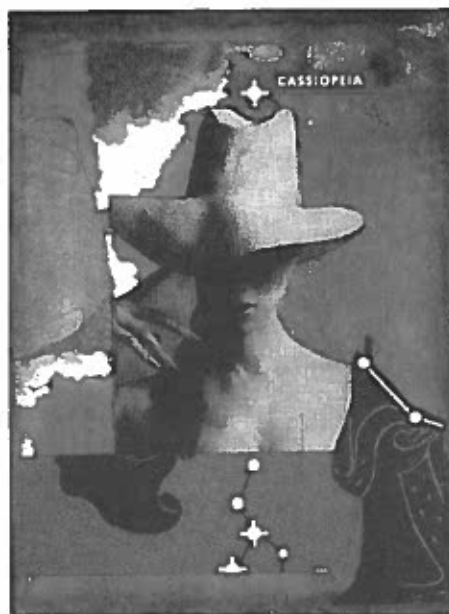


Joseph Cornell, 1964 Photo: Terry Schutté

He was aware, as well, that the stars of the sky affected the personal vision of creative figures like Beethoven and Rimbaud. *Cassiopeia*, the collage/gift to Terry Schutté in the exhibition, refers to the constellation named after the mother of Andromeda who was banished to the Northern skies. It is a metaphor for inspiration and is informed by knowing that Cornell adopted Stéphane Mallarmé's notion of "constellations" to describe his working system, as the "centripetal force of one topic spreading out in a luminous expansion."¹⁸

Further references to stars with articles on Enrico Fermi's theories on cosmic rays and images from the Hale telescope at Palomar Mountain, California, are included along with random notes, ca 1939- 1956, in Cornell's dossier "Experimental Films." The dossier was given to Jordan to edit the first trilogy of Cornell's films. In the dossier's "synopsis ca. 1939" Cornell's early life seems to be scripted as, "a lively children's party... vaudeville acts... and magical atmosphere." Later, "a new object is sighted," and, "lightning strikes in the house." The synopsis ends with "a planet just slipping out of the field of vision."

The first three collage films by Cornell, that Jordan finished, are composed from documentaries and old Hollywood films. The freedom Cornell gave to their working relationship, Jordan feels, was based on his attempt to,



Joseph Cornell, *Cassiopeia*, n.d., mixed media, Collection of Terry Schutté

"get other people to add their illuminations to the project... [The collage films] are the first found footage, now a kind of sub-genre in experimental filmmaking. There is nothing in the film that the filmmaker thinks should be seen to educate the audience. Their freshness comes from the carefully collected images the artist loved and wanted to preserve." Cornell's approach varied technically from most film-

makers. He would find an image he liked and instruct a lab to make a duplicate to be inserted in the film, as a "freeze frame." It was similar to the way he copied images, as Photostats, for his two-dimensional work.

When Jordan lived with Cornell for one month in 1965, Cornell frequently brought up the subject of a film on himself during breakfast, later saying, "No, that would not be a good idea." One day, unbeknownst to Cornell, Jordan shot the only film footage of his mentor from an attic window. Still photographs relay a look of frailty in Cornell. But Jordan's nine minute tribute to the artist records the strength in Cornell's hands, piecing a roof back on a birdhouse. The film is a memoir to the kind of power Jordan witnessed, as Joseph Cornell "made boxes."

Signe Mayfield
Curator

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¹Windham, Donald. *Aviary by Joseph Cornell* (New York: Egan Gallery, 1949-50). The quote begins, as follows, "Birds are remarkable for the distances they travel, for their faculty, incomprehensible to man, of knowing the relations between remote places. The essence of Joseph Cornell's art is this same genius. . ."

²Jordan re-spliced, added sound tracks with music or voices and effects, and pronounced the movies finished for the first trilogy *Cotillon, The Children's Party, The Midnight Party* (c. 1940-1968), as well as *A Legend for Fountains* (completed in 1965); and *Mulberry Street*, 1965. He shot footage for a missing film *Flushing Meadows* at the grave of teenager Joyce Hunter whose death severely affected Cornell. Jordan has, in addition, other reels of Cornell's found footage to edit in the future.

For additional information on the films see Sitney, P. Adams: "The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell" in *Joseph Cornell* (exh. cat. edited by Kynaston McShine; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980)

Jordan currently teaches film and collage and box sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute, a course called "The Lost & Found Department." As seen in the exhibition, he has continued to explore box-constructions in his own work.

³Hartigan, Linda Roscoe: "Joseph Cornell: A Biography" in *Joseph Cornell* (exh. cat. edited by Kynaston McShine; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980) pg. 93

⁴Hartigan, Linda Roscoe, pg. 95

⁵Blair, Lindsay: *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 1998)

⁶Joseph Cornell Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1061, 9 mar 59, as quoted in Blair, pg. 24

⁷Blair, page 26

⁸Sandra Starr sees Cornell as a religious thinker and metaphysical scientist. see, Starr, Sandra L., *Joseph Cornell: Art and Metaphysics* (exh. cat. New York: Castelli, Feigen, Corcoran Gallery, 1982)

⁹Dore Ashton has written extensively on Cornell's connection with Gerard de Nerval and other European sources in *A Joseph Cornell Album* (New York: Viking Press, 1974)

¹⁰Ades, Dawn: "The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell", *Joseph Cornell* (exh. cat. ed. Kynaston McShine; New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1980) page 34.

Dore Ashton states in *A Joseph Cornell Album* that Cornell's text operates as "a visual talisman."

¹¹Terry Schutté studied painting with Richard Lindner and aesthetics with Ashton at Pratt. As seen in the exhibition, her paintings rely on the gestural abstract mark. She currently lives in Texas.

¹²Ashton, pg100

¹³"Vôtre sublime simplicité pardonne à mon coeur un zèle."

¹⁴A dovecoat is a small compartmented, raised house or box for domestic pigeons.

Dickran Tashjian has identified the empty *Dovecoats*, as homages for the poet Emily Dickinson with references to Longfellow. Tashjian, Dickran: *Gifts of Desire* (Miami Beach, Grassfield Press, 1992) pps 87-92

¹⁵The filmmaker photographed *Centuries of June* for Cornell (1955) He was commissioned to make *Wonder Ring* in 1955 by Cornell. Rejecting Brakhage's version, Cornell edited the film by running it backwards and calling *GniR RednoW*

¹⁶Caws, Mary Ann. *Joseph Cornell: Theatre of the Mind* (New York & London, Thames & Hudson, 1993)

¹⁷Schneeman, Carolee. *More than Meat Joy* (New Paltz, NY: Domcentext, 1979) pg. 241.

¹⁸Caws, pg. 184